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S E R M O N

Preached on Occasion of the

GENERAL FAST

APPOINTED BY

ROYAL PROCLAMATION,

On FEBRUARY 6, 1756.

By THOMAS ASHTON, A. M.

RECTOR of St. Botolph, Bishopsgate.



L O N D O N:

Printed by J. KIPPAX, and sold by J. WHISTON and
B. WHITE, at Boyle's Head, in Fleet-Street,

MDCCLVI.

MEMORIAL

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On February 6, 1756.

By THOMAS A. M.

Rector of St. Paul's, Bishop.



LONDON:

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2 PETER ii. 9th and 10th Verses.

The Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations; and to reserve the unjust to the day of judgment to be punished---- But chiefly them who walk after the flesh, in the lust of uncleanness, and despise government; presumptuous, self-willed, they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.

WE are called upon, by authority, to humble ourselves before Almighty God: we have now, in consequence of that appointment, sent up our prayers and supplications to the divine Majesty, in the most devout and solemn manner, to avert all those judgments which we have most justly deserved—to continue his mercies—to perpetuate the enjoyment of the protestant religion amongst us, the safety and prosperity of these kingdoms and dominions—and have implored his protection and blessing upon our fleets and armies.

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ACKNOWLEDGING the great mercy of the Almighty, who has not only been our defence in *other* times of danger, but hath protected us from imminent destruction at *this* time especially, when some neighbouring countries in alliance and friendship with us have been visited by a dreadful and most extensive earthquake—which has also in *some* degree, and the effects of it in a *great* degree, been felt in several parts of these kingdoms and dominions.

AND this, I hope we have done (as we are particularly directed) in the deepest sense of our own impieties, which have most justly deserved heavy and severe punishments from the hand of heaven, and of the great miseries which the inhabitants of these kingdoms must inevitably have suffered if a like visitation had been shewn forth upon them—and to shew that we place our whole trust and confidence in the mercy of Almighty God, as well to deliver us from so heavy a calamity, as also to direct and support us in the present situation of our *public* affairs, which, as to the issue of them, are of the highest importance to the peace and safety of these kingdoms—to our commerce and liberties—and, *above all*, to the *most valuable* blessing of the protestant religion.

ON this account, I have chosen the words I first read, as they contain some reflections which may deserve our attention upon the present occasion.

THEY are not a complete sentence of themselves, but oblige us to look back a little farther for the completion of the sense.

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THE reasoning which introduces them is this :

IF God spared not the angels who sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment ;

AND spared not the old world, but reserved Noah, the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly—

AND, turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them with an overthrow, making them an ensample to them that after should live ungodly—

AND delivered just Lot vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked, (for that righteous man dwelling amongst them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds)—

IF all these things be so, as we know they are, then it is clear that the Lord knoweth how to deliver the godly out of temptations, and to reserve the unjust to a day of judgment to be punished.

HERE we have an induction of particulars upon which the general assertion in the text is grounded.

To shew, beyond all controversy, that the Lord does know, or has determined to *deliver the godly* out of trials, and to *reserve the unjust* to a day of judgment to be punished, he instances in three well-attested acts of the Lord's immediate interposition to vindicate his own sovereignty, by the delive-

rance of those who acknowledged it, from the visible destruction of those who set up their own will in opposition to it.

THE detrusion of *all* those angels, but of those *only*, who *sinned* from their original state of honour and happiness—

THE destruction of the *whole world* of the ungodly by the deluge, with the reservation of eight persons *only*, the *whole* remains of those, who had kept up a sense of religion amongst them—

AND the *total overthrow* of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire, turning the whole into ashes, with the exception again of *one only* family, who had not suffered themselves to be infected with their *execrable* practice.—

THESE are instances, sufficient in their number and in their nature to prove what they were produced by the apostle to prove: that the Lord knows, or has decreed, at times and in ways foreseen only by himself, to bring *sudden destruction* on those who obstinately refuse to obey his commands without involving in that destruction those who do.—In particular cases, where the ordinary course of his providence has not provided corrections proportionate to men's crimes, to *visit the guilty* with immediate and exemplary inflictions of his displeasure, reserving the *innocent only* as peculiar monuments of his regard.

BUT though every kind of sin is displeasing to God, and sure not to leave its punishment far behind, yet the apostle particularizes a character which is very singularly offensive to him, and more likely than any other to bring down his im-

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mediate judgment upon those who come within its description—*But chiefly those who walk after the flesh, in the lusts of uncleanness and despise government—presumptuous, self-willed—they are not afraid to speak evil of dignities.*

Now as it is our duty, and ought to be our concern, to lay aside every weight which may retard our progress in the favour of God; so our highest interest is at stake, and our most vigorous endeavour should be exerted to clear ourselves of *that chiefly*, whatever it be, which we know to be most the object of his aversion, and most obnoxious to his *instant* vengeance.

WE have heard what account the apostle gives of this—and one part of his charge is so plain that it needs no comment. It speaks for itself. The best reproof for that conduct amongst *christians* is *not to name it.*

BUT the other part does not seem to carry so much conviction in it — *Who despise government, and are not afraid to speak evil of dignities!*

DOES it not sound as if it were said that a turbulent and clamorous spirit is the principal mark at which the arrows of the Almighty are prepared to fly? Is faction, then, and sedition a crime of so black a complexion as to stand foremost in the catalogue of those which call forth the avenging hand of God? It is said, indeed, that rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft—but that, we know, was rebellion against God.

I have no desire to be an advocate for sedition: But there seems to be less need to call in the *divine aid to avenge it,*
because

because it does often (in absolute governments especially) meet with the fate it deserves from the *hands of men*.

AND, indeed, this interpretation agrees but ill with the explication given of the place a little below, where the persons here described are said to speak evil of the things that *they were ignorant of*.

BUT it cannot be supposed that any man, much less that any sect or number of men (let their wickedness be as great as it can be) could be ignorant of the nature and sanctions of civil power.—These are amongst the first things that bad men become acquainted with, if it be but barely in order to evade the force of them.

THEIR crime was of a deeper dye! And as it is of the last consequence for us to know clearly what that disposition is which the apostle has declared to be most displeasing to God, and to call most loudly for his inflicting present punishment on all those who are hardy enough to persist in it, I hope it will not be useless, as it seems to me to be necessary, to lay this part of the text more open, than it now appears to be.

THE word then which is here translated *government*, is, generally, in the New Testament, applied to *celestial power*; as Ephesians i. 21, where Christ is said to be exalted far above all dominion—and dominions are mentioned, Colossians i. 16. amongst the *invisible things* of the creation. Indeed it is a derivative of that very title which is given, by way of eminence, to Christ Jesus when we stile him *Lord*—and may with great propriety be translated, the *lordship* or *supreme government of Christ*.

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AND this corresponds entirely with the description of these men both here and in St. Jude, (who wrote upon the same occasion and near the same time, and whose epistle is on that account the best comment upon St. Peter's) who are said by one apostle to deny the *Lord* who bought them; and by the other, to deny the *only potentate* Jesus Christ, *our Lord and God*; that is, they absolutely rejected the extraordinary, if not the ordinary, providence of God, and his government of the natural and moral world by Jesus Christ.

2 Pet. 2. 1

1 Tim 6. 15
Jude. 4.

THEY ridiculed the prophecies concerning Christ's second coming, either in vengeance to complete the desolation of the Jews, or in glory to reward the fidelity of his distressed disciples, and were so far from having any expectation of his promises, that they laughed at all who had:—Saying, where is the promise of his coming! And the reason of their insult was such as could only be given by a profest fatalist or an absolute unbeliever. For since the fathers fell asleep, say they, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation.

AND that *government* is here particularly ascribed by the apostle, and by them denied to Christ, will appear more strongly, only by giving the word which is translated *dignities* its obvious and literal sense — and speak evil of, or blaspheme *the glories* — and this we are warranted to do from a like use of the same term in St. Peter's first epistle; where, speaking of the declarations of the prophets concerning the *christian* dispensation, he tells us, that they had given previous testimony to the sufferings of Christ, and the *glories* which were to be consequent upon them.

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HERE it is properly translated, and does undoubtedly refer to the different states in glory which St. Paul gives us reason to expect at the resurrection of the dead — *There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars, for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead.* The word being plural is highly expressive of the different orders and degrees of glory with which our blessed Lord will, at his last appearance, reward his faithful followers.

THE translation, then, of this part of the text instead of “who despise government, and are not afraid to speak evil of dignities”, will be perhaps better read thus, “who hold in contempt the Lordship, or supreme dominion, of Christ, pre-sumptuous, pleasers of themselves, and blaspheme without horror the glorious privileges of his future kingdom”.

4.13 AND this is confirmed by a passage from his first epistle — *Rejoice that you are made partakers of the sufferings of Christ — that when his glory shall appear ye may be glad with exceeding joy — If ye be reproached for the name of Christ happy are you, for the spirit of glory and of God (or of the divine glory) resteth on you — which (glory) is blasphemed (the very expression which is here translated speaking evil of dignities) by them; but by you esteemed as it ought to be.*

THE crime, then, from the prevalence of which there is most reason to apprehend the sudden stroke of divine vengeance appears to be (from the apostle's account of it) a contempt of the sovereignty of Christ; and blasphemy against the glorious rewards which he has promised!

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THIS is, indeed, a crying sin—it calls aloud for vengeance! It is defying the only power we have reason to fear, and rejecting the only help on which we can securely rely! It is the highest indignity that can be offered to the Majesty of heaven, and includes in it every *lesser* breach of his law! It is doing despite to the spirit of grace, and giving the lie to the testimony which God has given of his Son!

IT is the very blasphemy which had this indelible mark fixed upon it by the word of truth; that it should *never* be forgiven in *this* world, or in that which *is to come*. It seems to be threatened with temporary as well as with eternal vengeance, by him who *is to be feared when he is angry*, and whose indignation, once provoked, nothing but repentance can disarm. For so it is written, What shall *the Lord*, when he comes, do to those Husbandmen? —He shall miserably *destroy* those wicked men, and give the Vineyard to others! And again — When *the king* heard this he was incensed, and sent forth his armies to destroy those murderers, and to *consume their city with fire!*

AND the event gave too fatal a confirmation of the knowledge and power of him who foretold it.

THAT city was the capital of Judea—Once the holy city—Here he loved to dwell—He had a delight therein—But she forfeited his protection with her own allegiance, and became the first fruits of his displeasure! Ill-fated city! Whose being lifted up so high served at last only to add more weight to her fall! Whose crime was so black that her Saviour could not prevent her punishment! Whose sentence so heavy that her

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judge could not pronounce it, even in the distant prospect, without a tear !

WHEN he beheld the city he *wept over it* and said, If thou hadst regarded in this thy day the things that belonged to thy peace—but now they are hid from thine eyes ! The prophecy is well known and the literal completion of it. The very stone which that proud city rejected, the rock from whence she was hewn *fell upon her and dashed her in pieces !*

COME, ye that disbelieve, and behold (in this as in the former instances) what *desolations* he hath wrought in the Earth--- Be still and know from hence that he is God—He will be exalted among the nations—He will be exalted *in the earth !*

YET even in this *judgment* (the extremity of which exceeds expression, conception and almost belief) he remembered Mercy ! At the same time that he reserved the *unbelieving and unjust* to *this* day of judgment to be punished. He knew how to *deliver the godly* from the fiery trial.

WHILE those who rejected his counsels, and would none of his reproof, *perished in their contradiction*, the despised body of those who trusted in his word, being admonished by his prophets, (as the historian of the time inform us) to leave the devoted city, were (in recompence of their fidelity) *exempt* from the general ruin.

SUCH was the fate of Jerusalem!—We have heard her crime! we have seen her punishment! There is no need to go back to the Shipwreck of the old world ; to the subversion of that detestable city, whose name, as well as suffering, is set forth for a lesson

lesson to those who shall after live ungodly; much less to the degradation of the angelic natures. The name of Jerusalem, (for that is all that has been long left of Jerusalem) shall remain, till time shall be no more, an incontestible proof of the assertion in the text; "That the Lord knoweth how to deliver
 " the godly out of temptation, and to reserve the unjust to a day
 " of judgment to be punished; but chiefly those who have
 " hardness enough to reject the will of God, and folly enough
 " to oppose to it their own——Who hold in contempt the do-
 " minion of Christ, and prefer the pleasures of this world to
 " the glories which he has promised in the next".

THOSE who believe what he has been pleased to declare of his will are already convinced of this——They who close their hearts against conviction will be convinced of it when it is too late.

It was by disobedience that they were broken off—— It is by obedience only that we stand —— Let us not be high-minded—but fear——

WE have as plain and full prophecies, as they had, that we shall in like manner perish, except we recollect ourselves. And so much stronger than they had, as their destruction is an additional, and a visible argument to us of the certainty of what is foretold concerning our own!

WE may as well doubt of the existence and power of God, as of the completion of prophecies which have been given under his direction.

THE great contest between God and man from the beginning has been, whether his will or theirs were to take place—— Whether we should please ourselves or him. And

ONE grand difference between the dispensation of natural, and of the christian, religion, is this — That in the former God is supposed to reserve the power in his *own hands*, in the latter he has expressly *delegated* it to his Son.

WHEREVER the power be lodged it makes little difference. The object to whom we are to address ourselves for support is varied by his express appointment, but the necessity of obedience remains the same.

AND we have the very same reason now for *trust in Christ*, that the antient people of God had for depending upon God himself.

TO him is ascribed the *creation* of the universe! And he, who made this earth and the inhabitants of it, cannot be ignorant in what manner to display his sovereign authority over them all. If we have any fear therefore from our own constitution he *knows whereof we are made*. If we are alarmed at the unsettled state of the globe! His *hands have fashioned it*, and he understands every tendency of it *long before!*

TO him is all power given in heaven *and earth*. He cannot therefore but know in what manner to exert that power to the confusion of sinners, and for the protection of his saints.

IN confirmation of this, the very *winds and seas* did obey him while he was here in his lowest state. He could enable the meanest of his followers to say to *the firmest rock* be thou moved and cast into the midst of the sea, and it should obey — and he can and will (when the ends of his dispensation require) make those very elements, which are the Instruments of com-

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mercial strength, conspire against us—and this earth, on which we place our utmost security, tremble under our feet; and we ourselves, while we are dreaming of extending our property upon the surface, may go down quick into the bowels of it!

OVER every element he has fully demonstrated his power — Air, water, fire have, in their turns, been the instruments of his vengeance.

HE hath made spirits, or the air, his messenger, and his minister, a flaming fire! He hath told before (at almost the distance of 2000 years) of violent convulsions in the earth which should precede his final visitation, and has he not lately fulfilled his word!

WHO does not even now shudder on *recollecting* the desolation of Lisbon? And, if it be so dreadful in the *relation*, what must it have been if we had beheld the various circumstances of distress which passed unobserved, and lay buried in the common ruin! To have been involved in those horrors which they who felt are not able to describe!

WHO may stand in thy sight, O Lord! when thou art angry! The waters saw thee and were afraid! The depths also were troubled. Thou art the God that doest wonders, thou hast declared thy strength among the people! Thine arrows went abroad! The earth trembled and shook withal! Thy way is in the sea, and thy path in the great waters, and thy *footsteps not known!*

THIS however heavy affliction to that unhappy people is a merciful admonition to the nations round them. Would to God

God we might be wise at others calamities which are past, rather than by our own which may be yet in store! Who knows but even now the judge may stand at his door! How little did they think of their calamity till they were overtaken by it, till their astonishment rendered them almost incapable of thinking of it! Their Fear came upon them as a whirlwind, and their desolation as an armed man! suddenly and irresistibly! A standing warning for every one of us to be prepared at *all* times to meet what may happen to any of us at any time. Our security is only in our obedience! and our protection from the Lord our God!

LET us not give ourselves to censure the lives of other men, but to reform our own. Let us pass no angry or ill-digested judgment upon the manner in which they have been visited, but prepare ourselves to meet every visitation of the Creator, of the Ruler, of the Judge of the world!

HIS judgments are like the great deep! No human reason can fathom them! When we attempt it, we go out of our element and beyond our line!

WE ought not, therefore, to add an insult to their misfortune, by representing them as stricken of God, and smitten for the *enormity* of their crime.

THE text, and the examples which are produced in proof of it, will inform us better. We see in the declaration of the apostle, and in every instance by which I have enforced it — That when the Lord decreed to bring vengeance on those who had forfeited his protection by their guilt, he never failed to shew mercy to them who had not forgot his authority,
nor

nor forsaken his commands! He destroyed those *only* who had sinned, and *all* those who had sinned.——Witness *all* the angels who fell! The *whole world* of *ungodly* that were destroyed at the deluge, and the *whole number of guilty* in the opprobrious cities! With *all those* who despised his sovereignty at the desolation of Jerusalem. And the *preservation of all* who had no part in the transgression in every place!

BUT how will this agree with what we know of the fate of this unfortunate city? —— Where the worst of those that perished could hardly be so bad as some of those who survived; who were (as we are told) so totally void of the two great principles of love to God and man, that they plundered one in defiance of the other, and with the very spirit of him, who was a murderer from the beginning, persecuted those whom God had wounded, and rejoiced in spreading the flame which humanity would have endeavoured to extinguish with its very tears!

THIS therefore is in this respect totally different from every instance in which we have seen that God has been pleased to interpose *judicially* to support the authority of his Laws!

AND so I conceive, by what we experience, that in all such cases it must be! For the very notion of a *judgment* seems to me to be “an *extraordinary* interposition of God to make “that *exact distinction* between good and bad men, which cannot be made according to the *ordinary course* of his “general laws.”—It is an anticipation, in some measure, of the great account, and in this light I conceive it to be said, that Sodom and Gomorrah, by the *judgment* which was inflicted upon them, were set forth as a demonstration of the fire eternal;

eternal; not only as they were destroyed by fire, but as the method of executing justice upon those cities was exactly conformable to the rule by which God has declared he will inflict eternal punishment. — It was an evident and entire discrimination between the worshippers of God, and those who acknowledged him not.

AND will any man allow himself to say, “that no one good man suffered,” we are very well assured that many bad ones escaped in this lamentable event.

THE only inference we can fairly make from it is that which will answer all the purposes of religion and duty, “That the earth is the *Lord's* and all that is therein, for he hath founded it upon the seas, and prepared it upon the floods!

WE should take care not to confound that general dispensation of his providence, in which all things come alike to all; with that equal measure of it by which he gathers the wheat into his garner, but burns the chaff with inextinguishable fire. Otherwise we may happen to lose our own charity in determining of his justice. — For his thoughts are not as our thoughts! Happy it is for us that they are not! What a scene of things should we have, if God were pleased to ratify the sentences men rashly pass upon each other!

LET us leave God's government to himself! trust him with the conduct of his own providence,—look up to the rod and him who has appointed it!

IF we are thankful that we are not consumed, let us shew it by obedience!

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IF we desire protection to our fleets and armies, let us acknowledge the sovereignty of that Lord of battles, who ruleth over the kingdoms of the earth!

IF we have a real value for that most valuable, but I fear least thought of blessing, the protestant religion, — let us not only protest against a few speculative errors of another church, but reform the practical failings of our own!

IF we have a due sense of the universal *dominion* of our Lord, we shall learn from *his word* how to cultivate every virtue which will be the ornament and support of our country, and to shake off every vice, the practice of which, as far as it can naturally operate, must tend to its destruction!

ABOVE all, let us not think that *one serious day* can do our work! As our danger is perpetual, so let our care be too! I leave to others to declaim against the sins of this land. — I recommend to every one of us to take off as much as he can from the common stock. — Every man's business must lay within himself. — Let us judge ourselves, that we be not judged of the Lord. Then shall we have nothing to fear though the earth be moved, and though the hills be carried into the midst of the sea!

BUT if on the contrary, we are bold enough to set up our *own will* in opposition to *his*, we shall do well to consider whether we are stronger than He! that we should provoke the Lord to anger.

WE will suppose ourselves to be entirely free from the apprehension of these shocks in the earth — Alas! is that

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all we have to apprehend! Are these the only instruments in the hand of God!

WHEN we look into the constitution of ourselves, how contracted is the knowledge of the ablest physician! When we dive into the constitution of the earth, how doubtful is the determination of the most accurate philosopher!

UPON whom then will you depend, but upon Him who made you both!

I will suppose that these signs did not forebode the dissolution of all things; and that this earth should continue as it has done from the beginning beyond the time that we shall have any concern upon it: This is all that the most determined advocate for natural, for second causes, can pretend! What will he or you gain by that! This only, that you shall be dead before! and then you are sure you cannot escape, if you do till then, the decisive judgment of God!

REMEMBER too, that as surely as the Lord created this earth, so surely he will destroy it. That his day will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat; the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burnt up.

YE, therefore, beloved, seeing that ye know these things before, beware lest ye also being led away by the error of the wicked fall from your own steadfastness. — But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, — to him be glory for ever! Amen.

F I N I S.



